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ABSTRACT

This document contains three related papers addressing the issue of youth suicide. "Youth Suicide: An Investigation of Ideation, Prevalence, Depression and Student Awareness" (R. Ladson Berry) presents results from a survey of 283 junior high and high school students in South Carolina public schools. Findings are reported that revealed a significantly higher mean total score on the Reynolds Adolescent Depression Scale (RADS) for students who had attempted suicide than for those who had not, a high level of awareness among peers about suicide and students who had attempted suicide, and a large number of students who had inaccurate information and/or beliefs about suicidal behavior and ideation. "Youth Suicide: Assessment Issues" (Judith D. Pearson) uses results from the first paper to suggest that the RADS may be a useful screening measure for identifying potentially suicidal students if used in conjunction with other information. It explores assessment of lethality and issues related to legal considerations. "A Caring Approach to Youth Suicide...Prevention, Intervention and Postvention" (Susan H. Baker) describes a manual designed specifically for secondary school educators on prevention, intervention, and postvention and provides information on how to order the manual. (NB)

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"What Can We Do About Youth Suicide?"

Symposium
National Association of School Psychologists
April 20, 1990

Paper 1
Youth Suicide: An Investigation of Ideation, Prevalance, Depression, and Student Awareness

Presenter R. Ladson Berry

Paper 2
Youth Suicide: Assessment Issues

Presenter Judith D. Pearson

Paper 3
A Caring Approach to Youth Suicide ... ... Prevention, Intervention and Postvention

Presenter Susan H. Baker

This symposium is a summary of over 3 years' work by more than a dozen practicing school psychologists of the Piedmont Regional Association of the South Carolina Association of School Psychologists.

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"What Can We Do About Youth Suicide?"

National Association of School Psychologists Symposium Presentation
April 1990

Paper 1 Youth Suicide: An Investigation of Ideation, Prevalence, Depression and Student Awareness

Presenter R. Ladson Berry
Spartanburg County School District Three
Glendale, S.C.

ABSTRACT: As part of its attempt to understand the growing problem of youth suicide, the Piedmont Regional Association of the South Carolina Association of School Psychologists conducted an in-depth survey of 283 students chosen randomly from grades 7 through 12 in South Carolina public schools. The survey consisted of the Reynolds Adolescent Depression Scale (RADS) and a series of questions written by school psychologists. Included among the findings were: (a) a significantly higher mean total RADS score for students who had attempted suicide than for those who had not attempted ($p>.01$), (b) a high level of awareness among peers (40% reported knowing students who had attempted suicide), and (c) a large number of students who had inaccurate information and/or beliefs about suicidal behavior and ideation. The results suggest that school systems can help deal with student suicide by tapping into peer awareness and by providing better education about depression, suicide and problem-solving strategies.

As part of its attempt to understand the growing problem of youth suicide, the Piedmont Regional Association of the South Carolina Association of School Psychologists conducted an in-depth survey of 283 students chosen randomly from grades 7 through 12 in South Carolina Public Schools. The survey consisted of the Reynolds Adolescent Depression Scale (RADS) and a series of questions written by school psychologists. Students from 13 middle, junior and senior high schools answered the survey anonymously. The questionnaire portion consisted of 18 questions, some multiple choice and some open-ended, which addressed the following areas:

whether or not students knew of others who had considered/attempted suicide; whether they themselves had considered, planned, or attempted suicide; how much they used alcohol and drugs; how they could tell if a peer was in danger of suicide; what they would do if a friend told them they were thinking of suicide; how to deal with depression; and how knowledgeable they were about common suicide myths.

Evaluation of responses to the questionnaire and of scores from the RADS revealed numerous findings. Four primary results included: (a) The level of awareness and thinking about death by suicide among the students in the sample was high. There was considerable acknowledgment of personal thoughts, feelings and actions. Over 50% of the students reported knowing other students who have thought about committing suicide, almost 40% of the students reported knowing students who had attempted, and 15% of the students reported knowing students who had committed suicide. Additionally, 15% of the students reported having given serious thought to committing suicide themselves, and 8% acknowledged having tried to commit suicide.

(b) Students who had attempted suicide and significantly higher mean total RADS scores than students who had not attempted (t-test, $p<.01$). In addition, students who acknowledged they had seriously thought several times or often about suicide obtained significantly higher RADS scores than students who acknowledged seriously thinking about suicide once or never (t-test between group means,

$p<.01$).

(c) Student responses to true/false questions about myths suggest that a large number of students have some inaccurate information and/or beliefs about suicidal behavior and ideation. Twenty percent of the students indicated their belief that if students talk about committing suicide, they will not go through with it. Forty-seven percent of the students responded that suicide happens without warning. Thirty-four percent of the students responded that people considering suicide should not be asked about it because they might be led to commit suicide.

(d) Responses indicated that more students considered help from peers rather than adults when depressed or in crisis. When asked what students thought could help depressed young persons, peers were viewed as potentially helpful resources in 17% of the responses, while parents and family were identified in only 9% of responses, school staff in 6% of the responses, and mental health or clergy in 5% of the responses.

The overall results suggest that:

(1) The RADS in conjunction with other information can be utilized as a screening instrument for suicide. This conclusion is pursued further in paper 2.

(2) School systems can help deal with student suicide by tapping into peers' awareness, by providing better education about depression, suicide and problem-solving strategies, and by developing more effective case management practices. These implications are pursued further in paper 3.

"What Can We Do About Youth Suicide?"

National Association of School Psychologists Symposium Presentation
April 1990

Paper 2 Youth Suicide: Assessment Issues

Presenter Judith D. Pearson
Spartanburg County School District Six
Spartanburg, South Carolina

ABSTRACT: It has been difficult for school psychologists and counselors to assess potentially suicidal students. Based on survey results of students (see Abstract 1), the Reynolds Adolescent Depression Scale (RADS) appears to be a useful screening measure if used in conjunction with other information. Data indicate that selected questions from the RADS may be particularly sensitive to suicidal ideation. In addition, it appears that direct questioning of screened students adds further information that can identify students at risk. Suggestions for assessing lethality as well as issues related to legal considerations are explored.

Psychologists have many available tools to assess intelligence, personality and academics, but how do we assess the potential for suicide? This paper 1) examines the Reynolds Adolescent Depression Scale (RADS) as a screening tool, 2) examines a psychologist-made informal questionnaire for students, and 3) explores issues related to assessing lethality.

Based on results of a research survey (see Paper 1), the Reynolds Adolescent Depression Scale (RADS) appears to be a useful screening measure is used in conjunction with other information to identify depressed and at-risk adolescents. The fact that one-third of the research sample who scored high on the RADS had attempted suicide suggests that students who obtain significant RADS scores be

followed up by school support services staff. Because the RADS is a relatively inexpensive instrument which is both readable by students and quick-easy to administer, schools could consider large-scale screening of students for depression and suicidal behaviors and ideation.

The RADS could be accompanied by a questionnaire similar to the one used in the research survey (See Paper 1). The students appeared to be very honest when answering the psychologist-made questionnaire concerning their suicidal thoughts and/or attempts. It would be interesting to investigate whether those students would have been equally honest if the questionnaire had not been anonymous. If so, these direct questions would be a very helpful screening source.

A difficult assessment issue is how to determine lethality. Is the student suicidal, and, if so, how immediate is the threat? Based on current literature, one method is to interview the student directly, focusing on four areas: 1) Have you thought about suicide? 2) Do you have a method? 3) Do you have a plan? 4) When do you plan to follow through?

A further issue of considerable importance is how the courts may define liability in the event of a suicide. There are few precedents at this time.

"What Can We Do About Youth Suicide?"

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Paper 3 A Caring Approach to Youth Suicide...
...Prevention, Intervention and Postvention

Presenter Susan H. Baker
Spartanburg County School District Three
Glendale, South Carolina

ABSTRACT: Based on recent trends, it is likely that sooner or later each school system will have to deal with a youth suicide attempt or completion. There is an increasing need for school personnel to have information on how to deal with youth suicide. The Piedmont Regional Association of the South Carolina Association of School Psychologists has prepared a manual designed specifically for secondary educators on prevention, intervention and postvention. Information includes: in-service ideas on how to prevent suicide, sample guidelines for referral, a sample school plan for responding to a suicide, what to do when a attempter returns to school, a reference list of resources for educators, a reference list of books for adolescents, and samples of student writing and artwork. Manuals are available for $6.00 each. Send checks to: The Piedmont Association of School Psychologists, P.O. Box 574, Drayton, S.C. 29333.

In 1986, following several local student suicides and attempted suicides, a number of school psychologists begin meeting to consider the scope of the problem in South Carolina and ways in which school personnel could better meet the needs of area students, staff, families and the community in the area. The group became convinced that we needed to know how pervasive the problem was in the state, how to educate school personnel about suicide as it occurred among students, and how to respond in the event of a threat, attempt or completed suicide. As was sought information about what others have done and made plans for our own efforts, the

project mushroomed in scope. What seemed like a manageable short-term project has taken more than three years to complete.

Our primary premise is that schools need a plan in place before a suicidal crisis occurs. Appropriate responses at a building or a district level may vary greatly from place to place. School personnel do need to face the likelihood that such a crisis will occur in their area at some point in the foreseeable future and they need to know what they will do at that time.

This presentation is divided into sections detailing prevention, intervention and postvention. It is our fervent wish that the material contained in this symposium will provoke thought, concern for young people, and a determination to tailor a plan to meet the needs of particular schools and communities.

Prevention: Several factors were considered in selecting the most important information for teachers on the prevention of suicide. Looking at the broad perspective, it seemed important that teachers understand the primary prevention issue of self-esteem. The impact that individual teachers and, indeed, the whole educational system have on the development of the positive or negative self-perception of a young person cannot be ignored. While recognizing that his critical concept is indispensable to understanding the issue, the constraints of time argued for a difficult strategy. The decision was made, therefore, to utilize a secondary prevention strategy of providing direct information for teaching staff. The manual

presents a framework for such a teacher in-service by guidance counselors, schools psychologists or other interested professionals. The prevention in-service contains suggestions

a) to help teachers become more aware of the problem of suicide,
b) to give teachers basic information about identifying students who may be at risk, and
c) to help teachers feel more confident in assisting these students in finding positive solutions for their problems.

Intervention: There are many misconceptions about suicide which cloud thinking and consequently inhibit the effectiveness of caring people who are called to help troubled students. To assist school personnel, sample strategies are provided for working with students in suicidal crisis, as well as policies and procedures which can be implemented during and after a suicide attempt. Special attention is given to how to deal with attempters when they return to school, including what school staff members can do and what fellow students can do to maintain normal school functioning while at the same time meeting the returning attempter's special needs.

Postvention: It is important to have a plan in place before a completed suicide or other crisis occurs. The shocking and disorientation which accompany a tragedy can preclude well-considered decisions. Each school needs to develop a plan which is tailored to the particular characteristics of its community, students and staff. Information in the manual covers the following

areas: immediate response to a completed suicide, helping the students survivors, helping parents of students survivors, supporting staff members, memorials, and how to deal with media.

Other: To further assist school systems, the manual contains an annotated reference list for professionals, as well as suggested readings for adolescents.

Manuals may be purchased by sending a check for $6.00 each to: THE PIEDMONT ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS, P.O. BOX 574, DRAYTON, SC 29333.